More Fairbury History Mysteries

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All small towns have some historical mysteries that still need to be solved. Fairbury has its fair share of history mysteries as well.

John Coomer Sr. was the first person to build a house in Fairbury in late 1857. John ran a lumberyard for about five years. He sold the lumberyard, became a real estate agent, and made loans. John had a granddaughter named Harriet Fogle. Harriet graduated with the Class of 1911 in Fairbury. She married a young medical doctor, Warren Bell, in 1916. Harriet and her husband lived in New York until they moved to Seattle around 1927.

In 1927, Harriet was visiting friends in New York. During her return trip from New York to Seattle, she stopped in at Fairbury. The Pantagraph noted that Harriet had entered the film-producing business in late 1926. She had one film produced and was going to California to make six more movies. By 1930, Harriet had divorced Dr. Bell and married James Fulton. They moved to the San Diego area and had three children.

Unfortunately, no records can be found regarding the number of films she made or the names of the movies. Maybe someday, more information about her pioneering role in making films will be discovered.

At one time, Fairbury had over 100 African Americans living in town. They built an African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church at the southwest corner of Second and Walnut Streets. An African Methodist Episcopal church yearbook shows the Fairbury church was still operating in 1967. A new home was built on the same site in 1972, indicating the old church was torn down between 1967 and 1972. Unfortunately, no photographs of the exterior or interior of the church can be found. Maybe someday, old photos will be discovered showing this church's interior or exterior.

Movies are a fascinating historical record. Unfortunately, only two sets of films about Fairbury can still be viewed. Dr. Pendergast was a Fairbury optometrist who had the unusual hobby of collecting and repairing cigar store Indians. He became a nationally known expert in this field. In 1942, a short movie clip was made about Dr. Pendergast fixing cigar store Indians. This video can be viewed at https://tinyurl.com/v5edk56.

The second set of video clips that can still be viewed were shot by Watt Nakamura circa 1960. Watt was a Fairbury photographer who shot videos at the Indian Creek Golf Course, the Fairbury Swimming Pool, the Homecoming Parade, and Honegger's hatchery. These clips can be found on YouTube by searching for "Nakamura Fairbury."

In 1921, the Central Opera House, located at the southeast corner of Third and Maple Streets, announced a new initiative. First was a three-week-long contest for the citizens of

Fairbury to vote for which young local lady would star in a film made in Fairbury. Miss Irma Fitzgerald won the competition. As the winner, she got to pick which of her Fairbury friends would appear in the movie. In May of 1921, the film The Waif played for two nights with standing room only crowds. Unfortunately, no copies of this film can be found. It is very likely the film was destroyed when this opera house burned down in 1952.

In 1937, E. N. Nelson, manager of the Central Theater, contracted Pacific Film Productions to make a movie about Fairbury. The film company shot two reels, or 2,000 feet of film, in Fairbury. The video included school scenes, business clubs, women's clubs, business scenes, street scenes, and pictures of leading merchants.

The Pacific Film Productions company made many small-town videos. Unfortunately, only a few of them have survived and can still be viewed. No copy of the Fairbury film can be found. The film may have been destroyed in the 1952 opera house fire. It would be fascinating to see what life was like in Fairbury in 1937.

John Virgin was a prominent Fairbury businessman. He imported Percherons from France and sold them to Fairbury area farmers. In 1888, he built a grand stable called the Horse Palace on Third Street just north of Walton's.

Third Street was paved with bricks in the early 1930s. An old photograph still exists of the workers paving the block just north of Old City Hall. The outline of the unique architecture of the Horse Palace can be seen in this old photo. The Horse Palace was believed to be torn down between the early 1930s and about 1945. The exact date of when the Horse Palace was torn down remains a mystery.

William Stackpole was one of early Fairbury's most interesting residents. William was a gold prospector, real estate salesperson, inventor, writer, publisher, and visionary during his life. His home at 312 West Maple Street still stands at the southeast corner of Marsh Park. William made and lost three different fortunes. He died penniless. William, his wife Jennie, and his daughter Anna were buried in unmarked graves in Graceland Cemetery. Their grave location is the Old Cemetery, block 16, lot 2, grave numbers 2,3 and 4.

William and his family moved to Fairbury in 1857. In 1867, son William G. Stackpole died at one year of age. Daughter Mary Lilia Stackpole died in Fairbury in 1870 at the age of thirteen. In 1871, daughter Isabelle E. Stackpole passed away at one year of age.

The burial location of these three Stackpole children is not known. The early Graceland burial records were destroyed in a fire many years ago. Maybe someday, the burial location of these three children will be discovered.

The photographer was standing at the intersection of Locust and Third Streets and was looking north onto Third Street. The unique architecture of John Virgin's Horse Palace can be seen just north of Walton's on the left hand side. The Third Street Opera House can be seen on the right hand side of the photograph. New bricks are stacked on the east side of the street so workman can pave Third Street with bricks.